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Mr. Helms In Tel Aviv

Rumors are flying again in the Middle East, and they are not likely to be allayed by the visit of Richard Helms, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, to Israel. The visit was supposed to be secret and both Israel and the United States denied it until news leaks in Israel and abroad forced it into the open. So much for the credibility gap.

But the basic question is, What is Mr. Helms doing in Israel? Secretary of State Rogers has taken the lead in American efforts to find a way to peace in the Middle East, and he is the proper person to represent Washington diplomatically. Why should Mr. Helms meet with Prime Minister Golda Meir, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan and Foreign Minister Abba Eban?

The only reason we can think of is that the CIA chief might be expected to have secret information relating to Russian or Arab intentions. Speculation that a renewal of diplomatic relations between Russia and Israel may be in the offing arose a few days ago after reports that a Russian journalist had visited Israel. A month ago Mrs. Meir denied reports she held secret talks with Soviet officials during an unannounced visit to northern Finland. Soviet-Israeli diplomatic relations were severed in 1967.

Israeli officials also may be worried about the so-called phantom memorandum, a paper given Egypt in May by the U.S. representative in Cairo, Donald Bergus. It purportedly set forth a plan for getting the Suez Canal reopened; its source was obscure. It apparently prompted complaints by Russia of secret Cairo-Washington dealings.

What all this means, if anything, remains as carefully hidden as a CIA appropriation. We can only hope that behind-the-scenes progress toward accommodation is being made.